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‘We Are Not As They Think About Us’: Exploring Omani EFL Learners’ ‘Selves’ in Digital Social Spaces

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This paper reports a research study of Omani EFL learners’ motivation to engage in social technologies through the medium of English, adopting Dörnyei’s (2009) L2 Motivational Self System as the main theoretical framework, whilst exploring other emergent context-sensitive motivational driving forces. The purpose of the research study was to explore identities and self-perceptions of Omani nationals using social media to learn English, an under-researched context. Reflective focused group discussions were conducted with 14 university-age students, along with individually composed language learning histories. The data of the research lends substantial support to the relevance of the L2 Motivational Self System in the Omani context, highlighting, in particular, the emerging collective national and religious identities of young Omani nationals. The paper argues for the need to deepen and broaden our understanding of the association of English social technologies and the national and religious affiliations of learners.

Keywords: digital social spaces, learner motivation, identity, Oman, EAL

Introduction

The English Language Teaching (ELT) reform in Oman sets out to advocate interactive use of the target language by integrating the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in meaningful social encounters. Students are deemed integral players of the learning process, assuming responsibility for their own learning, deciding on how to approach different activities, following their own preferred learning style, choosing the topics that appeal to them, and eventually evaluating their progress (Borg, 2006). Nevertheless, Moody (2009) postulates that ‘although there has been significant investment in English language teaching (ELT) in Arabian Gulf countries, most professionals agree that results have been disappointing’ (p.99). Particularly, Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011) criticise Omani graduates for their evident linguistic deficiency and communicative adequacy. According to these researchers, ‘ELT reform in Oman has changed in theory, but has been largely otherwise in practice, and that disparity between theory and practice still exists and persists’ (p.170).

This research study explores learner autonomy, identity, and motivation through reference to L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009), and the self-discrepancy model of learning (Higgins, 1987; Lanvers, 2016). There is growing interest in the relationship between these constructs, however, further research is still required to broaden and deepen our current understanding of their contingent, complex, and dynamic nature (Gao and Lamb, 2011). Thus, this study is geared towards exploring the link among these constructs through students' engagement in social technological applications, prompted by the rising prominence of Web 2.0 technology. This timely research study resonates with the current educational policy in Oman that immensely asserts the significance of learner autonomy along with technology in order to help Omani students to be well-equipped with key skills essential for successful professions, life-long learning, and well- informed citizenship in the 21st century (Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi, 2011). It also corresponds to the contemporary thinking in the field of second language motivation.

Ushioda (1996, 2011) stresses how self-motivation is important for the affective aspect of students' learning experiences, so that they can effectively counteract demotivating experiences in language learning. She also emphasises motivating students to speak as themselves (Ushioda, 2011) by expressing their own identities through the target language in an autonomy supportive environment and exercising increased control and choice over their language learning experience (Ushioda, 2009).

This original study proposes that previous research has neglected to explore important motivational aspects of language learning in Oman, in particular neglecting to focus on the increased opportunities for English language development afforded by digital social spaces. This study's research question: 'What are Omani learners' motivations to participate in English speaking digital social spaces?' therefore seeks to close this gap in the research. Through a qualitative methodology involving reflective focused group discussions and language learning history research with fourteen participants, this study found that young Omani adults have distinct and powerful reasons to learn English, which they view as inextricably linked to their Omani identity.

Explorations from the Literature

The use of digital media, and in particular, digital social spaces, has a firm place in research around English language acquisition. In congruence with autonomous pedagogy, McLaughlin and Lee (2008) propose a learner-centred 'Pedagogy 2.0'

underpinned by a socio-constructivist theory, which integrates Web 2.0 tools that support greater learner autonomy through encouraging co-construction of knowledge, networking with peers and communicating with a global audience.

In the same vein, Chik and Briedbach (2014) maintain that social media tools promote learner autonomy, engaging students in authentic and meaningful interactions with their peers both within and outside the classroom, and granting them the opportunities to self-express their identities and personalise their learning. Web 2.0 technology represents pedagogical affordances which are invaluable in autonomous language learning and teaching, due to theoretical underpinnings that emphasise the active role played by the learner in their attempts to construct knowledge in collaboration with others in a social learning environment. Many researchers on autonomy have stressed the significance of collaboration and interdependence in line with the development of a learner's capacity for autonomy (Benson, 2011; Little, 2000). Ushioda (2011) points towards a correlation between the development of autonomy and identity, resulting in increased enhancement of motivation in socially mediated learning processes. She points out that 'motivations and identities develop and emerge as dynamically co-constructed processes' through social interaction (2011, p.22).

This study explores virtual social spaces afforded by Web 2.0 technology, highlighting them as undoubtedly social contexts that foster language learning and collaborative interdependence, where learner autonomy, motivation, and identity become intertwined.

Learner Autonomy, Motivation, and the Notion of 'Self'

Ushioda argues that teachers should promote autonomy, as 'it is a way of encouraging students to experience that sense of personal agency and self-determination that is vital to developing their motivation from within' (2011, p.224). Dickinson highlights some autonomy-motivation links by offering insights into self-determination theory (1995). Self-determination theory postulates three fundamental human needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2002). Competence means that learners have the capacity to perform certain actions effectively, and hence search for chances to challenge themselves in order to enhance their skills, while relatedness refers to an identification of task or context as being relevant to one's own life. Web 2.0 technologies have provided opportunities which expand on those originally described by the authors, opening up new affordances for and interpretations of notions such as

'belonging', 'relatedness', and 'identity', and necessitating a fresh look at both the terminology and at learners' lives.

Norton (2000), in her critique of social psychological approaches to L2 motivation, argues for a comprehensive theory of identity, emphasising the social interaction between the language learners and their learning environment. Additionally, she develops the motivational notion of 'investment', highlighting 'the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it' (Norton, 2000, p. 10). With the development of Dörnyei's 'L2 Motivational Self System' (2005, 2009), identity constructs have been introduced into the field of language learner motivation. According to this theory, two distinguished selves are represented: the Ideal L2 self and Ought-to L2 self. The Ideal L2 self is concerned with personal hopes and aspirations, implying what a person would ideally like to become (Kim, 2009). The Ought-to L2 self refers to what people feel obliged to become, possibly imposed on them by parents, teachers and other social pressures (Kim, 2009). The third component of Dörnyei's model includes the L2 learning experience, covering 'situation specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience' (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 106). Drawing on Dörnyei's theory, target language proficiency is assumed to be an integral aspect of one's ideal or ought-to self, and exerts a profound impact on our motivation to learn the language due to our psychological need to decrease the disparity between our present self and future selves (Ushioda, 2009).

Lanvers (2016), however, critiques Dörnyei's 'Ideal/Ought' model as too simplistic and binary, and proposes to extend the model, returning to Higgins (1987) original self-discrepancy theory. While her work is situated among Anglophones learning another language, her argument for a problematisation of Dörnyei's model is well-made, and culminates in a re-introduction of a more nuanced model, which allows for standpoints of self which are influenced by a variety of 'others', including significant others, peers, socio-cultural milieu, and global milieu (p. 90).

Motivation and Identity in a Collectivist Society

In our explorations of motivation, possible selves, and identity, it is important to acknowledge and take into account cultural variation (MacIntyre, Mackinnon and Clement, 2009). While independence is particularly as part of western individualistic societies, individuals in eastern collectivist societies place much value on

interdependence, fostering a collectivist approach (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Social motives therefore hold more potential to shape the notion of an 'ideal self' of young adolescents (Lamb, 2013). Two studies conducted in China reveal that the notion of spreading Chinese culture and identity to the world is the influential motive behind learning English (Lo-Bianco, 2009; Orton, 2009). Islam, Lamb and Chambers (2013) maintain that 'National Interest' can act as a powerful drive for learning English in Eastern cultures. To further illustrate this point, Gore (2009, p.77) states that:

> Westerners assume that personal motives are the most effective in directing behaviour because they are also expressive of the individual, independent self…In contrast, members of Eastern cultures may perceive relational motives as more effective reasons for pursuing goals because they involve a collective interest in the outcome.

Research in the Middle Eastern Arab countries suggests that national and religious commitments can play a key role in students' motivation to learn English. A case study carried out in Jordan reveals that students perceive English as a powerful tool to acquiring knowledge and skills, as well as gaining cultural understanding of the western world, which is necessary for national advancement and, particularly, for promoting the truth about Islam, viewing themselves as "religiously, rather than materialistically, motivated to learn English" (Al-Haq and Al-Masaeid, 2009, p. 283). Digital technologies allow for an ever-increasing exposure to and participation in multicultural social spaces, necessitating a fresh look at this particular context.

Learners' identities in the Web 2.0 Era

Moving the notion of identity construction online, Potter (2012) talks about 'curatorship' (p. 5), taking into account how individuals collect, assemble and distribute their lives on social media, emphasising the need to remain focused on 'human rather than technological determinism' (ibid). Returning to Ushioda's (2011) argument regarding the critical notions of identity and self, which are evident in the recent second language motivation theories, and the value of provoking students' identities in their social participation, she indicates a particular relevance to the learners' online communication. Ushioda points out that

> students' transportable identities are grounded not only in the physical world of their lives, interests and social relations outside the classroom, but increasingly in the virtual world of cyberspace […] in which so much of their life is immersed' (2011, p. 12).

Chik and Briedbach (2014) explain how the second generation of Web development, Web 2.0, emphasises the importance of participation and collaboration via discussion forums, blogs, and various social networking sites. Murphy (2014) considers students' engagement in Web 2.0 forums part and parcel of their identity and motivation. If these technological applications are to be regarded as motivational resources for language learning and language use, autonomous engagement is needed (Ushioda, 2011). Potter's (2012) notion of curatorship in and of itself implies choice and control – control over what to share, how to share it, and how to present oneself in cyberspace. Furthermore, students' engagement in the virtual world of social technologies creates the possibility of constructing L2 future selves that can better enhance their motivation and develop their autonomy (Chik and Briedbach, 2014, 2011; Murphy, 2014).

Methodology and Methods

The primary goal of this study was to explore the intricate link between learners' autonomy, identity, and motivation through their engagement with digital social spaces. Thus, the qualitative paradigm driving this research study endeavoured to capture in-depth accounts from maximum possible sources of data in order to obtain rich information and to provide further diversity. Such a paradigm emphasises thick information without being confined by pre-determined categories (Pattern, 1990), and enables researchers to explore the complicated nature of the social world, allowing a person-centred approach as well as providing diverse views that help enriching epistemology (Richards, 2003).

Participant sample

The fourteen research participants are Omani EFL student teachers enrolled in the college of Education at a tertiary institution in Oman. They were three males and eleven females. In fact, the full cohort of EFL student-teachers includes 90 females and seven males only. Therefore, four males expressed their interest to take part in the study. It is worth mentioning that recruitment of participants was based on their voluntary participation. They were at their final year of studying. The rationale behind situating

the study within a school of education, which is responsible for training future EFL teachers, is to give insight into the students' efforts to promote out-of-class autonomous language learning environments through the use of virtual social spaces. Thus, the students occupy dual identities as EFL learners and prospective EFL teachers.

The research sample is almost homogenous. All of the participants are Omanis with the average age of about twenty-one to twenty-two years old. They had twelve years of formal schooling before joining the university. In choosing a homogeneous group of participants, it was hoped that they would feel comfortable sharing their views via group discussions.

Official access was sought to gain access to the students in the college of Education through approaching the office of the Vice-Chancellor's advisor for Academic Affairs. A covering letter along with the ethical approval of the research was submitted, stating clearly the topic and aims of the study, pointing out the recruitment and collection of data. Ethical issues were also explained. After receiving permission, the full cohort of EFL final year student-teachers were met in the beginning of 2016 autumn semester in Oman, and were introduced to the research project. Initially, sixteen students decided to take part in the study. However, two (one male, one female) decided to withdraw due to academic pressures.

Reflective Focused Group Discussions

Focus groups aim at creating a permissive atmosphere that embraces a wide range of perceptions, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the situation being studied (Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub, 1996). By the same token, Krueger (1994) maintains that focus groups yield qualitatively insightful data by providing a clear understanding of the participants' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences. Denscombe (2007) further explains that focus group interviews are characterised by three important elements as follows:

- Each focus group discussion focuses on a specific experience related to all participants who have similar knowledge.
- Group interaction is particularly reinforced as a means for collecting information.
- Group discussion is facilitated by the moderator.

Three focus groups were formed, comprising two female groups and one male group. Those discussions were of a progressive focus, with each session throwing lights on a specific theme such as English language learning experiences, English language learning through virtual social spaces, Future L2 Selves, educational affordances of social technologies, reflections on teaching practice, and finally reflection on potential impact of participation in the research on awareness-raising. In total, six group conversations were held over three months. Participants were offered a choice whether to conduct discussions either in Arabic or English. The participants decided on English as the mode of communication, mirroring their high motivation to communicate in the language. All discussions were audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed.

Introspective Language Learning Histories

In order to gain greater insights into learners' cognitive and socio-affective dimensions of language learning, language learning histories (LLHs) were utilised as a research method. These histories are introspective research narratives written by language learners, reflecting critically on their past learning experiences and expressing their feelings with regard to these experiences (Oxford, 1995). Therefore, the use of language learning histories can provide learners with great chances to voice their inner feelings and hence transform such emotions (Richardson, 1994). From a constructivist perspective, language learners' affective reactions and expressions towards their learning experiences can empower them in the sense of constructing meaning (ibid).

Another vital area is the collaborative construction of knowledge grounded on Vygotskyian social-interactive learning theory (1981). Vygotsky emphasises the support of more capable others to build meaning through social interaction. Language learning histories can thus vividly highlight these aspects of social interaction, culture, and context.

Participants wrote varying language learning histories, ranging from one page to fifteen pages for each individual student. Some of them started writing their histories following each discussion and some of them took six months to complete them according to their free time. Neither deadlines nor specific guidelines were imposed on them, instead, the focus was on allowing participants to shape and own their own narratives, in line with Ushioda's (2011) argument for placing the locus of control with the learner.

Data Analysis

Denscombe (2007) maintains that qualitative analysis is grounded on a logic of discovering patterns from the compiled data, a logic "of generating theories on the basis of what data contains, and of moving from the particular features of the data towards more generalised conclusions or theories" (p. 288). Data elicited from focus group discussions, and introspective language learning histories was transcribed and coded thematically according to the research questions, existing body of literature, relevant theoretical frameworks adopted, and other emerging themes. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), codes are mainly labels used for assigning meaningful units to the descriptive information elicited during a study. Further emphasis is introduced by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) as they illustrate that coding is an organisational procedure used for classifying the text of transcripts according to recurring patterns discovered within that organisational structure. More specifically, coding allows researchers to discover regularities in the obtained data by identifying key themes relating to the issue in question (ibid). Therefore, a qualitative thematic analysis approach was employed so that themes were identified and classified into initial broad categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006), including recurring themes pertinent to the research questions, relevant literature, and the theoretical frameworks being referred to, as well as other emerging themes through the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The study observed the core ethical considerations and procedures linked to confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent (Borg and Gall, 1983; Burgess, 1989). However, a considerable concern in relations to ethics was the specific research context. Henn, Weinstein and Foard (2006) point out that "the power of certain people and groups to resist a researcher's investigations is also likely to affect the outcome of any research study" (p. 74). Given the inequitable relations of power within the Omani education system, it was important to ensure students did not feel obliged to participate. Suad, who conducted the focus groups, therefore outlined explicitly that she had no influential power over the students' academic assessment.

An additional ethical consideration concerned the ownership of the participants' learning histories/narratives and the impact of representation. Who owns the stories? People tend to view and interpret the world around them differently as they seek to make sense of their experiences (Gibbs, 2007). In order to treat participants' stories

respectfully, participants were invited to check narratives and interpretations. Nevertheless, given the fact that the research embraced a socio-constructivist approach, the study inevitably resulted in shared experiences. Thus, the analysis occasionally reflects the stories of the learners as groups, emphasising the group as a unit of analysis.

Findings and Discussions

Identity Curatorship and Omani Representation in Cyberspace

All of the fourteen research participants eloquently articulated their motivational drive behind engaging in the digital social spaces through the medium of English. They expressed their desires to project a positive image of the Omani, Arabic, and Islamic identities which can be interpreted as a reaction against Islam-phobia promoted heavily through social media. One participant explained in her reflective language learning history that;

> Virtual spaces help me to correct any misconceptions that the world has about us. Speaking English can be a powerful tool in this sense because most people in the world accuse Muslims and Arabs of being terrorists and backwards. It is our responsibility, though, to change these misconceptions and eradicate them. We need to show them how Islam is a religion of love and peace.

Potter's (2012) notion of curatorship is also clearly represented in the following focus group excerpt by a male participant:

> Through my own virtual space on Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, I try to make sure that my Omani personality is clear because the Arabic content especially the Omani one is lagging behind when compared to other languages. In other words, it is one way for us to show people that we are here and not living in a tent with no interaction with the outside world.

The participants expressed, again and again, their perceived responsibility to change public perception: "I feel that it is my duty to show the world that what they see on the news is not necessarily true because I have the privilege of knowing my way around a computer and that I can speak the language" (male participant). Such a sense of duty chimes with prior research by Gore (2009) and Al-Haq and Al-Masaeid (2009), differentiating collectivist from personal goals. What is of particular interest is the sense of agency, i.e. the belief that not only is there a duty to fulfil, but also a possibility of

success. This correlates with Ryan and Deci's (2002) notion of competence, forming part of the self-determination theory.

'Relatedness' (Ryan and Deci, 2002) is also represented among the data, with participants describing their engagement and exchanges in great detail. One female participant explained how blogs were her favourite digital social spaces, since they allowed for both the sharing of personal opinions, but facilitated links to facts, which, she argued, means that "people can change their minds and be convinced with many universal topics like Islam is not a religion of terrorism". Neither Dörnyei's L2 motivational self system (2005, 2009), nor Lanvers' (2016) extended system quite express the complex relationship between the notion of 'self' as intrinsic to the language learners themselves, others' visions of the 'ought' and 'ideal' self of the learner, and an additional 'identity', imposed by society and media through prejudice and misconception, which is at a discrepancy with their own self-concept, both present and future.

Participants were, however, also aware of certain opinions with Islamic groups, around the perceived influence of English on their cultural and religious values. One male participant wrote in his language learning history:

> Some people think that English is a threat to their Islamic and national identity which I disagree with. We can use English as a way to show people that the idiots they see on TV killing people don't represent the real Islamic values. Our Islamic values taught us tolerance and to be laid back. As for the national aspect, English is the language of the world and we cannot keep up with the world if we stay in our cocoon.

The participants' role in society, therefore, was perceived to be dual – providing a bridge to overcome misconceptions and dogmatic opinions on both sides of political, cultural and religious arguments. This meant that they constructed their 'cyberlife' carefully, as already outlined, but also provided insight into how this life corresponded to their imagined future self.

The establishment of L2 ideal selves as cultural and religious emissaries

In line with Dörnyei's L2 motivational self-system, the study explored how participants viewed their future 'ideal selves', exploring dreams and desires, and their impact of behaviour and motivation. The language learning histories of the Omani EFL participants and the focus group discussions furnished evidence for the intimate link

between participants' animated sense of national affiliations and their L2 motivation. Their most cherished dreams and future aspirations seem to be concomitant with their national or collective affiliations.

One of the participants, belonging to the third male group, would like to be an international Omani video gamer in order to spread the Omani culture, specifically, to the rest of the world through promoting the Omani cultural values, dress code, rich heritage, tourist attractions, religious beliefs and landmarks via his video games. He did not seem pleased about the portrayed image of Oman as a passively quiet country among the Arabian Gulf Countries, which was an image negatively projected by those neighbouring countries as he thought of. As such, he designed a YouTube channel, displaying his video games. He also reached out to other international video gamers, participating in a community led by their mutual passion. Potter's (2012) notion of curatorship comes to the fore here, with the participant actively selecting aspects of Omani culture to share via his digital outputs.

Likewise, a female participant from the second female group expressed her strong desire to be a famous international Omani writer so that she could present Oman and its culture to the world, while another explained her motivation as follows:

> For me, English is the weapon to achieve my dream and it is the source of energy because I want to be an English teacher and an international public speaker to make a difference in the Omani educational system, and hence become an agent for change.

She went on to explain that online exchanges allowed her to exchange pedagogical ideas with teachers in other countries, which she viewed pedagogically advanced in relation to Oman.

Similarly, another male participant, from the third male group, expressed his future desire to be a translator 'in order to promote the Omani tolerance and peacefulness to the world to set an example'. These views echo those by Al-Haq and Al-Masaeid (2009), highlighting participants' desire to educate the outside world about their culture and religion. This goal is shared even more explicitly by another participant from the first female group, who visualised her future self as a caller for Islam, presenting her Omani and Islamic cultural identity. In her language learning history, she writes:

> Some of [my] reasons [to learn English] are to be a caller for Islam, to travel abroad and resemble my identity as an Omani, Arab and Muslim, to show the world that we are not as they think about us, to keep searching for the truth [about Islam], to go and teach those who need help and education, and many other things.

The Omani participants' future selves could be seen intimately intertwined with national and religious interests, characterising the Omani collective society. Their motivations to participate in digital social spaces – and the ways in which they do so - are driven, as Ushioda (2011) points out, by complex interacting variables relating to learner autonomy and identity.

Conclusion and Implications – Imposed and Displayed Selves

Responding to the research question in relation to the Omani learners' motivations to participate in English speaking digital social spaces, the data of the research study lends credence to the L2 Motivational Self System to serve as a platform to explore the motivations of university Omani students to engage in the English speaking technologies, allowing rooms for further development pertinent to the understanding of contemporary L2 motivation in the globalised world. If Omani students are to be ready to participate in global exchanges in the 21st century, as conceived by the Omani government (Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi, 2011), their lives online – and the identity they choose to share with the world - are integral aspects of this global participation.

Corresponding with Ryan and Deci's (2002) self-determination theory, participants displayed autonomy (taking control of their cyberlives and the initiative in participating in digital social spaces), competence (outlining clearly the pathways, technical and language skills necessary for their participation), and relatedness (having a clear understanding of their standing and role within the digital social spaces they frequent). Similarly, their perception of their future self (Dörnyei, 2009) is clear, and based on their motivations to make a difference to the world's understanding of Islamic religion and culture. Nevertheless, we argue for two additions to the motivational self system, to incorporate the possibility of future selves being influenced, not as Dörnyei outlines it in his 'ought to' self, by outside demands placed upon the individual, but instead an 'imposed self' which is the result of media-influence perceptions, and which results in a 'displayed self', which aligns with Potter's (2012) notion of curatorship, and is of particular importance in the digital context. This 'displayed self', while controlled by

the student, is heavily influenced by society and the media, who in turn 'curate' information to convey a certain image of culture and religion, which the Omani students in this study rebelled against. The choice of wording that English is a 'weapon' indicates that English is more than simply a way for individual advancement, but that the participants are very much aware that, by actively seeking out English-speaking digital spaces, they may encounter both prejudice and misunderstanding, an interpretation of their identity that is not linked to them as individuals, but instead imposed upon them through their national and religious roots. The notion of 'self discrepancy' (Higgins, 1987) here refers to how they regard this imposed identity in relation to the self they wish to show the world, carefully 'curating' (Potter, 2012) their cyber-life to convey their message. While this study is closely linked to the collectivist nature of the Omani society, and the specific ways in which Islam is represented in the media, further research is needed to fully explore the ways in which cyberspace influences our notions of self, and our motivations and ability to participate in specific digital social spaces. At a time where learning and teaching contexts become ever more 'super-diverse' (Vertovec, 2007), acknowledging the role that digital affordances play in learners' identify construction is vital for the development of an appropriate educational response to learners' needs. By acknowledging complex motivations to engage in target language and culture, teachers have the opportunity to facilitate their learners' sense of self and identity, while challenging more traditional approaches surrounding notions of target language and culture.

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